

## College Personal Statement Tips

### Consider the audience and purpose.

College admissions faculty read hundreds to thousands of essays each year. You want yours to be interesting and memorable. No matter what the specific prompt is, all personal statements serve at least these two purposes:

- To help the reader get to know you, at least part of you, beyond the other data provided in your application.
- To demonstrate your writing and thinking skills.

This is also the last part of your application you can really work on; the rest is largely a matter of compiling information.

### Try to . . .

- **Answer the question/address the prompt.**

With the exception of the Common Application, most schools' prompts will differ. It is probably not a good idea to try to recycle an essay without strong consideration of how well it answers the prompt at hand. Some essay prompts really are an invitation to tell a story about yourself while others seek very specific information.

- **Write an essay only you could write, both in terms of content and voice.** Be honest, creative, funny, unique, and be yourself. Try to capture something about your personality or highlight a way you are different from others.
- **Brainstorm. Brainstorm more than you think you need to.**

Many resources caution against writing on popular or common topics (ex. mission trip, winning the big game, or a simplistic look at how you worked hard to achieve something). Take time to brainstorm lots of topics from your own life experience.

Again, your topic is a vehicle for sharing something important about you.

- Possible Lists of 10 for brainstorming:
  - important people in your life (include allies and rivals!)
  - important books in your life
  - minor events that you remember vividly- maybe they're important
  - from your parent/guardian: 10 important events in your life
  - decisions you wish you had made differently
  - decisions you're glad you made
  - valued possessions
  - important places (think everyday and unusual)

Try starting with a 20-minute freewriting session, then go back and edit. Don't let yourself get stuck on the first line when you're just beginning to write!

- **Present a positive theme.**

It's OK if the event you share isn't entirely positive, but your overall tone and the reflections should be.

- **Make sure your first sentence is a hook.** It should make the reader want to keep reading. If necessary, worry about this after you've written the body of your essay. Many first sentences that work well drop the reader into a vivid moment in the writer's life.
- **Show more than you tell.** Vivid details that appeal to the senses will help tell your story in a way that makes an impression.
- **Edit and proofread with great care.** Leave enough time that you can take a real break from your essay and return to it willing to make major changes.

### Try to avoid. . .

- Making grand statements about major social or world issues. These tend to ring false.
- Sounding cynical, whiney or smug.
- Offending or embarrassing the reader.
- Repeating/listing information presented elsewhere in your application.
- Sounding like someone else who you think they want to admit.
- Writing like you are texting! Sound true, with clean, semi-formal tone and diction.

### Tips from WWU website

Grades and test scores are an important part of applying to colleges, but it takes a lot more than "the numbers" to tell your story. The application essay is a chance to give us a snapshot of who you are—your voice, your path, your goals. Here are some tips for telling us who you really are in your essay and activities list.

### Essay questions & activities list - make yourself come alive!

- **Spend time reflecting before you start your essay.** Your college essay is your chance to "speak" to the Admissions Committee, so make yourself come alive! Our essay questions are listed below so you can start composing a well-written essay that reflects you and your potential before you apply. The best college essays are those that make the reader feel like they know you, so write with sincerity.
- **Demonstrate sustained involvement.** Committing to—and staying in—a particular activity that you're passionate about or your experience in an academic course is more interesting than occasional or one-time participation. Tell us how those experiences affected you as a student or as a person.
- **Express your pride and appreciation for cultural diversity.** Enthusiasm for and experience within culturally diverse environments will be key to your success here at Western and beyond.
- **Don't be shy.** Applying to college is great practice for eventually applying for jobs in the "real world," where you are expected to "sell" yourself. Have you made a positive difference in the lives of others, whether in your family, community or school? Let your talent shine by telling us about your accomplishments in your activities list or by submitting additional information with your application. Letters of recommendation aren't required, but if a teacher or counselor has written one for you, feel free to submit it as well.
- **Proofread!** The content of your essay is important, but so is the written quality. Ask a teacher, parent or friend to read through your essay; they can catch errors or help you strengthen your message.
- **Do your research.** If you are interested in pursuing a specific major, learn more about the course offerings and program structure here at Western.

## **Personal Statement Prompts for 2019-20**

Note: Each college may require additional statements for scholarship consideration. Be sure to read application requirements closely!

### **University of Washington**

From UW Website:

Applicants will submit their essay and short responses in the UW section of the Coalition application (not in the new "Coalition Essay" section of the Profile).

Essay Prompt (required essay) Maximum length: 500 words

Tell us a story from your life, describing an experience that either demonstrates your character or helped to shape it.

Short response (required) Maximum length: 300 words

Our families and communities often define us and our individual worlds. Community might refer to your cultural group, extended family, religious group, neighborhood or school, sports team or club, co-workers, etc. Describe the world you come from and how you, as a product of it, might add to the diversity of the UW.

### **Western Washington University 2019-20**

Please select one of the essay prompts below and provide your response. Most essays are about 500 words, but this is only a recommendation, not a firm limit. Feel free to take what space is necessary for you to tell your story.

- Describe any activities you have been involved in related to diversity or multiculturalism in your community.
- Share a meaningful experience and how this has helped shape you in your preparation for college. This could be related to your passions, commitments, leadership experience, family, or cultural background.
- Admissions essay- topic of your choice. If you have written another essay that captures what you want the Admissions Committee to know about you, feel free to share it here.

### **WSU, CWU and EWU**

No personal statement required for most applications!

### **Evergreen State College**

Optional 300 words

What experiences (academic, service, or professional) have prepared you for college studies at Evergreen?

## **Common Application Personal Statement Prompts**

The Common Application is accepted by a large number of private colleges.

### **Choose one of the options. 650 word limit.**

Option #1: Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.

Option #2: The lessons we take from failure can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?

Option #3: Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?

Option #4: Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma- anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.

Option #5: Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.

# Sample 1

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I guess it was inevitable that I'd be on hockey skates at some point in my life, but I did not expect that I'd become one of a rare group of female ice hockey officials before I even reached high school. Being born into a family of hockey players and figure skaters, it seemed that my destiny had already been decided.

Right from the beginning, my two older brothers and my father strapped me up and threw me onto the ice. I loved it and, in my mind, I was on my way to becoming a female Gretzky! But my mom had to think of something fast to drag her little girl away from this sport of ruffians. Enter my first hot pink figure skating dress! That was all it took to launch

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fifteen years of competitive figure skating. Even though figure skating soon became my passion, I always had an unsatisfied yearning for ice hockey. It took a great deal of convincing from my parents that competitive figure skating and ice hockey didn't mix.

My compromise became refereeing ice hockey; little did I know that I was beginning an activity that would influence my character and who I am today. When I began, I would only work with my dad and brothers. Everyone was friendly and accepting because I had just started. I soon realized though that to get better I needed to start refereeing with people I wasn't related to, and that's when my experience drastically changed. An apologetic smile and an "I'm sorry" wasn't going to get me through games now. As I began officiating higher-level

games and dealing with more arrogant coaches, I suddenly entered a new male-dominated world, a world I had never experienced before. My confidence was shot, and all I wanted to do was get through each game and be able to leave. Sometimes I was even too scared to skate along the teams' benches because I would get upset by what the coaches would yell to me. "Do you have a hot date tonight, ref?" was a typical comment that coaches would spit at me during the course of a game. In their eyes, I did not belong on that ice, and they were going to do whatever they could do to make sure no women wanted to officiate their games. I was determined not to let them chase me off the ice.

I made the decision to stand up for myself. I never responded rudely to the coaches, but I did not let them walk all over me and destroy my confidence anymore. I started to act and feel more like the 4-year certified Atlantic District Official that I am. There were still a few situations that scared me. One time I called a penalty in a championship game during the third overtime and the team I penalized ended up losing because they got scored on. I knew I had made the right call, even though I was unnerved when I saw

the losing teams' parents waiting for me at my locker room; for the moment I wished I hadn't called that penalty. Although it was scary at the time, I stood my ground and overcame my fears. That was an important stepping-stone in my officiating career and in my life.

After four years of refereeing, I still can't say it's easy. Every game hands me something new and I never know what to expect. Now I have the confidence and preparation to deal with the unexpected, on and off the ice. I now also know to take everything with a grain of salt and not let it get to me. I have learned that life is just like being out on the ice; if I am prepared and act with confidence, I will be perceived as confident. These are the little lessons that I'm grateful to have learned as a woman referee.

Peterson's Best College Admissions Essays

Before this success, I had often felt myself to be an outsider, looking enviably upon one clique or another. This situation changed quite dramatically. Over the next two years I made many new friends. Just as importantly, I stopped viewing those who weren't my real friends as somehow unapproachable. The inner clique that exists in all high schools and which most everyone aspires to be part of now seemed unappetizing because, having made my own friends, I no longer craved to sit at their table. Losing weight and keeping it off was an accomplishment that allowed me to feel more self-confident. As a result, I was better able to deal with my peers. I got more out of the last two years in and out of school than from all the ones before. The ability to have the discipline to overcome this obstacle has meant a lot to me, not only because of the immediate benefits, but also because of the evidence it gave me about my internal fortitude.

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COMMENTS:

This essay shows an excellent writing skill and a good analysis of a marvelous undertaking with positive results to the body and psyche. However, its introspective content suggests a selfish person. (PLF)

Content/idea for the essay is a good one—Misspellings detract from it as do all the cute puns—better to stick to the facts and simply tell the tale. The merit lies in the truth, not in the style. (HDT)

100 Successful College Application Essays

Joseph Libson  
College: Princeton University

Accountable, neat

MY LIFE

*Chapter One: I become a truant*

The best thing that I ever did for myself was skip nine days of school in a row in the eighth grade. Actually the benedictions did not arise so much from the truancy as from the apprehension. This does not mean that I had been an axe murderer for the previous sections of my life, but rather that an unusual circumstance led to a great improvement in almost every aspect of my life. I was getting mediocre grades (i.e., B's and C's) at a mediocre school. I was not

taking drugs or doing anything particularly nasty, but I was being incredibly lazy. This sudden burst of lethargy that led to the nine-day truancy overcame the activation barrier that had prevented my parents from taking retaliatory measures in response to all of the smaller things that I had done. Their response was draconian; first they separated me and my brother (we are exponentially more troublesome when together). In addition to deciding to send me to another school to separate me and my brother, my parents also decided that the punishment should extend into the summer since the deed had been done late in April and the school's punishment of nine Saturday detentions (yes, like the ones in *The Breakfast Club*) and disciplinary probation seemed insufficient. This planting season sentence consisted of my taking summer courses. Thus, it came to pass that I took algebra II before ninth grade.



**Dimitri Steinberg**  
**College: Princeton University**

"It is a truth universally acknowledged" that things which come hardest taste sweetest and thus make all the difference. At the beginning of tenth grade, I was, in all honesty, a porker: not obese, perhaps, but definitely overweight. I was also not as popular as I would have wished. I doubt that there was a direct correlation, but I'm sure that my self-esteem was affected by this weighty problem. Although I knew that one's essential substance is more important than superficial show, I could not deny that I was showing more substance, physically, than was desirable. I had carried this burden, on shoulders and hips, since I was eight. In short, at eight, I ate.

After several fruitless (but cake-filled) attempts at dieting, I found myself thirty pounds on the wrong side of 140 at age fifteen. I still vividly recall my sincere desire to lose weight, my great love of food, and my frustration.

I needed an incentive to diet. As many previous attempts to shed pounds had gone awry (along with pastrami), a diet seemed a doomed and discredited project. Nevertheless, my parents wisely proposed that all three of us go on a diet and by four weeks the one who had lost the most would be paid \$10.00 per pound for each pound the others failed to match. I accepted the challenge. A fierce battle of weights ensued. My chief weapon in this struggle was the 250 calorie Dannon Light strawberry yoghurt. That, and a glass of orange juice was all I consumed until dinner each day. The three S's became my deadliest enemies: starch, snacks and seconds were banished from sight and stomach. The possibility of financial remuneration on one hand or monetary loss on the other overcame my urge to rush the refrigerator. At the weigh-in four weeks later, the scale shoed me minus 13, my mother minus 5, and my father minus 8. I thus extracted a poundage of \$130.00 and at the end of the contest I felt as if a huge weight had been shifted from my shoulders to my wallet. What happened afterwards was even more palatable. I had so conditioned my appetite to a glass of orange juice, a cup of yoghurt, and a small dinner that I maintained those eating habits for the rest of the year and thus continued to lose weight until I tipped in at a truly healthy number. I felt better about myself during the second, stabilized phase because I was deriving my pleasure from results gained without ploys or programs.

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When I arrived at Walnut Hills, which is the best academic public school in the city, I knew no one. This temporary exile resulted in a great discovery. Since I had no one to talk to during class, I decided that I would listen to see if the teacher was saying anything interesting. Lo and behold, knowledge flowed into and through me as excellent grades flowed out. At the tender age of thirteen, I had discovered that if I listened, I would understand. I had four straight-A quarters at Walnut Hills and transferred to St. Xavier, an even finer institution. It was closer to home and besides that my parents had heard that it was a "tough" no-nonsense school (good for discipline problems). As an additional plus, due to variances between the curricula of Walnut Hills and St. Xavier, I was able to become two years advanced in mathematics. Thus I was taking BC Calculus during my junior year at St. Xavier. My innovative listening theory still held at St. Xavier although more effort had to be put in to get the same grades simply because St. Xavier was a more difficult school.

Skipping nine days of school made me a better person, there is no doubt about it. Not only did my academics improve, but my devotion to athletics was enhanced to that of a religious fanatic and my sense of morals was even improved. I changed from a selfish rather unfriendly and sarcastic person into a more giving and open (but still sarcastic) individual. But, I was lucky; I got caught.

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**COMMENT:**

The truant manages to show the reader, in very few words, just how much perspective he has on his past experiences. His focus on "getting caught" highlights his obvious self-awareness because it is so "unadolescent" of him to see his "getting caught" and being "punished" as a catalyst to his own intellectual and personal growth of which he is so clearly proud. This anecdote had a strong impact on me because it rings true and because Joe's tone is very sincere. (AST)

## About.com College Admissions

### Striking Out - Sample Common Application Essay for Option #2

Read Richard's Essay on His Losing Baseball Game

By Allan Grove, About.com Guide

The sample essay below comes from Richard in response to the new Common Application essay option #2: "Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what lessons did you learn?" Be sure to follow the link at the bottom to read a critique of the essay, and also check out these [strategies and tips for essay option #2](#).



Baseball  
jaffyd / Flickr

#### Striking Out

I've played baseball ever since I could remember, but somehow, at fourteen, I still wasn't very good at it. You'd think that ten years of summer leagues and two older brothers who'd been the stars of their teams would have rubbed off on me, but you'd be wrong. I mean, I wasn't completely hopeless. I was pretty fast, and I could hit my oldest brother's fastball maybe three or four times out of ten, but I wasn't about to be scouted for college teams.

My team that summer, the Bengals, wasn't anything special, either. We had one or two pretty talented guys, but most, like me, were just barely what you could call decent. But somehow we'd almost scraped through the first round of playoffs, with only one game standing between us and semifinals. Predictably, the game had come down to the last inning, the Bengals had two outs and players on second and third base, and it was my turn at bat. It was like one of those moments you see in movies. The scrawny kid who no one really believed in hits a miraculous home run, winning the big game for his underdog team and becoming a local legend. Except my life wasn't *The Sandlot*, and any hopes my teammates or coach might've had for a last-minute rally to victory were crushed with my third swing-and-miss when the umpire sent me back to the dugout with a "strike three - you're out!"

I was inconsolably angry with myself. I spent the entire car ride home tuning out my parents' words of consolation, replaying my strike-out over and over in my head. For the next few days I was miserable thinking about how, if it hadn't been for me, the Bengals might have been on their way to a league victory, and nothing anyone said could convince me that the loss wasn't on my shoulders.

About a week later, some of my friends from the team got together at the park to hang out. When I arrived, I was a little surprised that no one seemed to be mad at me - after all, I'd lost us the game, and they had to be disappointed about not making it to the semifinals. It wasn't until we split into teams for an impromptu pickup game that I started to realize why no one was upset. Maybe it was the excitement of reaching the playoffs or the pressure of living up to my brothers' examples, but sometime during that game, I'd lost sight of why most of us played summer league baseball. It wasn't to win the championship, as cool as that would have been. It was because we all loved to play. I didn't need a trophy or a Hollywood come-from-behind win to have fun playing baseball with my friends, but maybe I needed to strike out to remember that.

Now read a critique of Richard's essay.

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